

back and forth between normal color and inverted color. This allows the person entering the data to change a particular viewer identification entry should that be required.

The special viewer identification numbers 71 and 72 are used to indicate the presence of male and female guests, respectively. If a 71 is entered as a viewer identification number, the following three line display appears as an overlay on the television screen:

|        |        |        |        |      |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|
| ML     | GUEST  | COUNT  | BY AGE | 2-6: |
| 7-11:  | 12-17: | 18-24: | 25-34: |      |
| 35-49: | 50-54: | 55+:   |        |      |

This is a request for the number of male guests in each of the age categories that are present in the room. In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the channel selector includes a scan up and scan down control ordinarily used to scan television programming. When in the viewer identification mode, this scan control can be used to position or move a cursor on the television screen to "pump" among the various categories displayed in response to entry of the special viewer identifications numbers. Entry of a number through the channel selector while the cursor is positioned at one of the categories is an indication of the number of guests in the specified age categories presented in the room.

In a similar manner, entry of the viewer identification number 72 produces an overlay on the television screen with corresponding age categories and directed to female guests present in the room. When the composition of the complete viewing audience has been specified, the person entering data can exit from the channel-lock condition and the display overlay is removed from the screen.

Upon subsequent entries into the channel-lock condition, the text overlays on the television screen are presented with the audience composition information displayed as it was defined the previous time that viewer identification data was entered. If the audience has not changed, this can be signified by merely entering and exiting channel-lock. If the audience has changed, the channel selector and scan control can be used to change any entries that are no longer connected.

In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, the viewer identification prompt is first issued when the television set is turned on. The viewer identification prompt is also presented whenever a 30 minute period passes with no viewer identification data being entered. In this manner, a complete account of audience composition is recorded by the data collection unit on a current basis for the programming being viewed on the television set.

Although the present invention has been described and illustrated with respect to preferred and exemplary embodiments thereof, it should be clear that various modifications are within the skill of those in this art, without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention.

We claim:

1. A system for collecting data with respect to cooperating television viewers or panelists at a plurality of panelist locations, said system including a central computer and a plurality of remote units at the corresponding plurality of panelist locations, each remote unit comprising:

a television display screen;

a television signal source having a plurality of channels of programming;

viewer control means including at least a means for selecting one of said channels of programming for display on said television display screen;

data collecting means including a microprocessor and memory means for storing programming information for said microprocessor and for storing data, said means in said viewer control means for selecting one of said channels being monitored by said microprocessor which stores in said memory means data representing the channels selected for display;

means under control of said microprocessor in said data collecting means for initiating at the remote locations on-screen prompts overlayed on normal programming on said television screen inquiring as to the identity of persons viewing the television screen at the time of the prompts; and

said viewer control means also including a means for entering viewer identity data into said memory means in response to the on-screen prompts.

2. A system in accordance with claim 1 wherein said means in said viewer control means for selecting one of said channels of programming for display comprises a channel selector associated with said television display screen.

3. A system in accordance with claim 1 including means for periodically establishing telephone communications between the central computer and each of the units for transferring stored data with respect to the data representing the channels selected for display and the viewer identity data back to the central computer.

4. A system in accordance with claim 1 including optical scanning means at each of the remote locations for use by a panelist to scan data, the scan data being stored in said memory means.

5. A method of collecting data from a plurality of cooperating panelists at a plurality of remote locations comprising the steps of:

providing at each remote location a television display screen, a television signal source having a plurality of channels of programming, and viewer control means including at least a means for selecting one of said channels of programming for display on said television display screen;

providing at each remote location data collecting means including a microprocessor and memory means for storing programming information for said microprocessor and for storing data, monitoring the means for selecting one of said channels in the viewer control means by the microprocessor and storing in the memory means data representing the channels selected for display;

initiating at the remote locations under control of the microprocessor on-screen prompts overlayed on normal programming on the television screen inquiring as to the identity of persons viewing the television screen at the time of the prompts; and providing the viewer control means with a means for entering viewer identity data into the memory means in response to the of screen prompts.

6. A method in accordance with claim 5 including the steps of providing a centrally located computer and periodically establishing telephone communications between the centrally located computer and each of the data collecting means for transferring stored data with